

Message Text

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LIMDIS

EO 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR, BG

SUBJ: MEETING WITH PRESIDENT A. M. SAYEM

SUMMARY. DURING MY MEETING WITH HIM TODAY, PRESIDENT SAYEM SAID INTERNAL CONDITIONS IN BANGLADESH WERE ALMOST NORMAL AND THAT BORDER SITUATION APPEARED ESSENTIALLY ALL RIGHT. HE EMPHASIZED HIS VIEW OF HIS OWN ROLE AS AN INTERIM, STOP-GAP PRESIDENT AND REITERATED HIS HOPE THAT NEW ELECTIONS COULD BE HELD BEFORE FEBRUARY 1977. HE SAID THERE WOULD BE NO CHANGE IN BANGLADESH'S FOREIGN POLICY WHICH WOULD REMAIN ONE OF STRICT NEUTRALITY AND FRIENDSHIP FOR ALL. END SUMMARY.

2. I MET WITH THE PRESIDENT FOR A HALF HOUR TODAY (NOV 17) WITH DCM CHESLAW, PRESIDENT'S PRINCIPAL SECRETARY CHASHI, AND NEW FOREIGN SECRETARY TABARAK HUSAIN ALSO PRESENT. THEY INDICATED THAT THE PRESIDENT ALSO HAD ENSUING APPOINTMENTS TODAY WITH SOVIET AMBASSADOR AND INDIAN HIGH COMMISSIONER.

3. THE PRESIDENT BEGAN BY EXPRESSING HIS APPRECIATION FOR THE GROWING FRIENDSHIP BETWEEN BANGLADESH AND THE UNITED STATES, TO WHICH OUR MASSIVE ECONOMIC ASSISTANCE

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HAD CONTRIBUTED SO MUCH. HE RETURNED TO THIS THEME AT

THE END OF THE CONVERSATION, DESCRIBING US AS BANGLADESH'S "BEST FRIEND." I REPLIED THAT I WOULD NOT GRADE BANGLADESH'S FRIENDS BUT THAT WE WERE GLAD TO BE COUNTED AMONG THEM. I TOLD HIM THAT WE HOPED TO HAVE THE SAME CLOSE AND COOPERATIVE RELATIONS WITH HIS GOVERNMENT THAT WE HAVE HAD HERE IN THE PAST AND THAT WE WOULD CONTINUE TO BE SYMPATHETIC TO BANGLADESH'S NEEDS.

4. WHEN I ASKED WHAT HE THOUGHT ABOUT THE PRESENT INTERNAL SITUATION, THE PRESIDENT REPLIED THAT IT WAS ALMOST BACK TO NORMAL BUT TURNED TO FOREIGN SECRETARY FOR CONFIRMATION AS HE DID REPEATEDLY DURING OUR INTERVIEW. WAS THE BORDER QUIET, I ASKED. THERE WERE STILL SOME REPORTS OF ACTIVITY ALONG THE BORDER, THE FOREIGN SECRETARY SAID, BUT NOTHING THAT SEEMED OUT OF THE ORDINARY. THE PRESIDENT ADDED THAT THEY HAD CONVEYED THEIR CONCERN FOR STABILITY TO THE GOI BY DIPLOMATIC AND OTHER MEANS. I NOTED THE PARALLEL IMPORTANCE OF REASSURING THE INDIANS ABOUT BDG INTENTIONS AND POLICIES AND THAT IT SEEMED TO ME THAT BDG HAD BEEN SUCCESSFUL IN DOING THIS.

5. THE PROBLEM OF DISCIPLINE IN THE ARMED FORCES WAS UNDER CONTROL, THE PRESIDENT SAID. TO MY QUESTION ABOUT THE DEMANDS BEING PLACED UPON THE MILITARY LEADERSHIP BY THE LOWER RANKS, THE PRESIDENT SAID THAT THESE DEMANDS WERE ESSENTIALLY FOR FRINGE BENEFITS. THE ENLISTED MEN REALIZED THAT IT WAS NOT POSSIBLE IN BANGLADESH FOR THEM TO RECEIVE HIGHER BASIC PAY BUT THEY WANTED MORE MONEY FOR FRINGE BENEFITS. CHASHI INTERRUPTED TO EXPLAIN THAT THIS HAD TO DO WITH LAUNDRY ALLOWANCE, HAIR CUT MONEY, AND FOOD EXPENSES. THE PRESIDENT SAID HE THOUGHT THESE REQUESTS WERE JUSTIFIED AND HOPED THEY COULD BE MET.

6. I SAID I HAD BEEN INTERESTING TO SEE THAT THE PRESIDENT MIGHT CONSIDER HOLDING ELECTIONS BEFORE FEBRUARY 1977. THE PRESIDENT SAID HE WAS ONLY AN INTERIM, STOP-GAP PRESIDENT, ADDING THAT "THIS IS NOT AN APPROPRIATE ROLE FOR THE JUDICIARY" AND THAT THE MILITARY LEADERS ALSO HAD NO POLITICAL AMBITIONS. THEREFORE HE WANTED TO HAVE ELECTIONS AS SOON AS POSSIBLE. THE FOREIGN SECRETARY INTERJECTED THAT THIS WAS ON THE
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CONDITON THAT THE CIRCUMSTANCES SHOULD BE SUCH AS TO PERMIT THIS. I ASKED HOW LONG BEFORE THE ELECTIONS HE INTENDED TO START POLITICAL ACTIVITY AGAIN AND HE SAID HE THOUGHT AOBUT A YEAR IN ADVANCE OF THE ELCTIONS; HE SAID THE PEOPLE WOULD TELL HIM WHEN THE TIME WAS RIGHT FOR POLITICAL ACTIVITY TO BE RESUMED AND THAT SO FAR THE POLITICAL LEADERS HAD WARNED HIM THAT CONDITIONS WERE NOT RIGHT.

7. WHEN I ASKED ABOUT THE NEW GOVERNMENT'S FOREIGNPOLICY, THE PRESIDENT SAID THERE WOULD BE NO CHANGE, THAT IT WOULD REMAIN ONE OF STRICT NEUTRALITY AND FRIENDSHIP FOR ALL.

8. I SPOKE ABOUT BILATERALISSUES AT THE CLOSE OF OUR CONVERSATION AND AMREPORTING THIS DISCUSSION IN SEPTTEL.

9. COMMENT. THERE WERE NO SURPRISES IN THE LINE THE PRESIDENT FOLLOWED TODAY AND THE SESSION WAS CHIEFLY INTERESTING AS A MEASURE OF THE FORMER CHIEF JUSTICE IN HIS NEW ROLE. ALWAYS A MILD-MANNERED, PLEASANT BUT QUITE UNFORCEFUL MAN, HE REMAINS SO AS PRESIDENT. HE DID NOT TAKE A STRONG LEAD IN OUR CONVERSATION, MAINLY REPLYING TO QUESTIONS AND FREQUENTLY ALLOWING HIS AIDES TO MAKE THE POINT AT HAND. OUR IMPRESSION IS REINFORCED THAT HE DOES INDEED SEE HIMSELF AS AN INTERIM PRESIDENT AND THAT OTHERS-- PARTICULARLY GNERAL ZIA--WILL PLAY THE STRONGER ROLES IN THE PRESENT GOVERNMENT.
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